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Rethinking the "Unthinking Decision": Old Questions and New Problems in the History of Slavery and Race in the Colonial South

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IN RECENT DECADES, HISTORIANS OF EARLY NORTH AMERICA HAVE explored the emergence of the institution of black chattel slavery. They have also investigated ideas of heritable physical differences and inferiorities that justified and defended slavery—concepts that moderns have called *race*. Chattel slavery and race were critical to the formation of the Atlantic colonial enterprise, even as they were simultaneously the products of it. Unsurprisingly, given the importance of the topic, the mechanisms by which both slavery and race became so firmly entrenched—how, when, where, and why—remain hotly debated questions. The outpouring of scholarship on these questions reveals astonishing regional variations in slavery and in the experiences of enslaved people, as well as the chronologically and geographically uneven development of racial ideologies. The resulting profusion of scholarship is both exciting in its complexity and daunting in its numbers. This is especially true of the region encompassing today's United States South, where understanding slavery and race has been critical to understanding the antebellum South and the so-called New South of the post–Civil War period, yet those nineteenth-century experiences cannot be conveniently applied to comprehending the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. In addition, the very complexity of the colonial South's experiences of slavery and race is difficult to assess synthetically, especially in the context of three European colonial powers, vigorous Indian groups, and free and enslaved blacks.

The historiographical problem of slavery and race in the colonial South is in part numerical: scholarly interest in human bondage grew steadily throughout the first half of the twentieth century, exploded during the 1970s, and has expanded geometrically ever since. In the past decade alone, compilers of the Bibliography of Slavery and World Slaving, a comprehensive online database, have added approximately

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1,500 titles annually, and at the moment the database contains approximately 25,000 items. Even though not all of these entries deal with Atlantic slavery from 1500 to 1800, the sheer profusion of available research is overwhelming, making it difficult for historians of slavery to construct a coherent whole out of the thousands of fragments of knowledge available.[1] Scholars continually add to what we know by readdressing old questions, finding new evidence, turning new methodologies on familiar evidence, and asking entirely new questions. Indeed, sometimes it seems as if we know too much about race and slavery, rather than too little.

The appearance in 1998 of two synthetic works brought order out of chaos for historians of North American slavery. Ira Berlin's *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* tracked the development of slavery and the experience of enslaved blacks in four corners of British North America (the North, the Chesapeake, the Lowcountry, and the lower Mississippi Valley) across three temporal divisions that Berlin labeled charter generations, plantation generations, and revolutionary generations. Berlin also concluded that the concept of race itself was a product of slavery: "the slaveholders' explanation of their own domination generally took the form of racial ideologies." Philip D. Morgan's *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* focused on two plantation regions of the British American South, comparing each region's geography, environment, and demographics to outline the processes by which black cultures formed and reformed in the early South. Morgan also noted the early fluidity of race relations in both the Chesapeake and the Lowcountry, in the early and late seventeenth century, respectively.[2]

Berlin's and Morgan's syntheses gave scholars of slavery coherent narratives to follow when teaching the topic (I give lectures to undergraduates using Berlin's generational schema). Yet synthesis has left the false impression that two core issues about the colonial history of race and slavery are settled: that there is scholarly consensus on the origins of the institution of slavery itself and that the origins of the ideological underpinnings of chattel slavery are clearly defined and

[2] Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), 9; Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill, 1998), 3, 8–18.

understood as products of the Enlightenment and eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century experiences. The books shared the Bancroft Prize in 1999, a sign of how seriously Americanists took both the books' synthetic approaches and their conclusions. More than a decade later, however, the questions of the origins of race and slavery continue to excite scholars, who are offering new and different solutions to these old problems. The question of origins has two separate but related spheres: one pertaining to the origins of slavery and the other to the origins of race. I will consider them first separately and then together.

When Oscar and Mary F. Handlin fired the opening salvo in 1950 in what came to be known as the origins debate, they made the startling claim that blacks in the English colonies were not initially slaves for life and legally were probably treated in most instances as indentured servants. Virginia blacks lived in a world where unfree labor of various kinds was normal and expected; indeed, the Handlins argued, the word *slave* merely connoted "a low form of servant." The transformation to recognizable chattel slavery took place in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, when "[c]olor . . . emerged as the token of the slave status."[3] That chattel slavery was not in and of itself an immediate feature of the American South became a widely accepted view, though historians debated the particulars. Winthrop D. Jordan famously labeled the move to black chattel slavery an "unthinking decision" predicated on deeply embedded English racism that responded almost automatically to the tobacco planters' dire need for labor. In Jordan's model, slavery in Virginia solidified after 1660. In contrast, Anthony S. Parent Jr. has argued that the legal construction of institutionalized slavery was the result of deliberate, premeditated moves on the part of English planters in Virginia—hardly an "unthinking decision."[4] Historians have wavered between these two poles of thought, assigning various degrees of premeditation and varying timelines in the move to black chattel slavery, with Virginia and Maryland remaining the preferred laboratories for examining the problem.[5] Gradual transformation remains an

[3] Oscar and Mary F. Handlin, "Origins of the Southern Labor System," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 7 (April 1950), 199–222 (first quotation on 206; second quotation on 216).

[4] Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill, 1968), 44–45, 71–82; Anthony S. Parent Jr., *Foul Means: The Formation of a Slave Society in Virginia, 1660–1740* (Chapel Hill, 2003).

[5] Among many relevant works are Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1975); and Russell Menard, "From Servants to Slaves: The Transformation of the Chesapeake Labor System," *Southern Studies*, 16 (Winter 1977), 355–90. For a gendered perspective that also embraces gradual transformation of the labor force, see Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, 1996).

accepted part of the standard explanation for the emergence of chattel slavery, and most scholars would agree that Virginians committed to slavery sometime between 1660 and 1690.

Berlin's synthesis adopted a formulation similar to the Handlins' early view: Berlin's charter generations included a group of people he referred to as "Atlantic creoles": black men and women who used the fluidity of slavery and the "blurred racial lines" of the period prior to 1675 to negotiate lives as free people in a land not yet dependent on chattel slavery.[6] An exemplar of the Atlantic creole was Emanuel Driggus, who, though probably considered enslaved when he first appeared in Virginia's county court records in 1645, eventually bought his freedom, married an Englishwoman, and thrived for a brief time in the 1650s and 1660s as a planter on Virginia's Eastern Shore. Driggus and other members of the free black community on the Eastern Shore such as Anthony Johnson, Francis Payne, and Tony Longo offer historians an attractive scenario for a past that might have been—a colonial South not dependent on chattel slavery and in which slavery played only an incidental role.[7]

Yet that alternate past, no matter how appealing it might be to a society that now wants to think of itself as postracial, did not come to pass. Emanuel Driggus himself was not living independently in his last appearances in the Northampton County court records; he was deeply in debt and listed as a tithable on John Custis's 1674 tax list, suggesting the possibility of some form of reenslavement for an elderly man who had fought to maintain his freedom and that of his family.[8] Driggus's struggles coincided with the Chesapeake region's growing attachment to plantation agriculture, England's headlong plunge into the transatlantic slave trade, and the declining flow of indentured migrants from England, which when combined with the political and social upheavals of Bacon's Rebellion (1675–1676) led to a late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century boom in the slave trade and a new commitment

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[6] Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 29. Some recent work has questioned the validity of the idea of the Atlantic creole. See, for example, James H. Sweet, "African Identity and Slave Resistance in the Portuguese Atlantic," in Peter C. Mancall, ed., *The Atlantic World and Virginia, 1550–1624* (Chapel Hill, 2007), 225–47, esp. 246.

[7] On Emanuel Driggus, see Deeds, Orders, and Wills, III, May 27, 1645, folio (hereinafter fol.) 82; Orders, VII, October 1, 1661, fol. 113; and Orders, VII, April 2, 1662, fol. 116, all in Northampton County Court Records (Library of Virginia, Richmond), microfilm; and Rebecca A. Goetz, "Emanuel Driggus," in Sara B. Bearss et al., eds., *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, vol. IV (Richmond, forthcoming). On the free blacks of Virginia's Eastern Shore, see T. H. Breen and Stephen Innes, *"Myne Owne Ground": Race and Freedom on Virginia's Eastern Shore, 1640–1676* (New York, 1980); and J. Douglas Deal, *Race and Class in Colonial Virginia: Indians, Englishmen, and Africans on the Eastern Shore during the Seventeenth Century* (New York, 1993).

[8] Deeds, Orders, and Wills, IX, 1674, fol. 274, Northampton County Court Records.

on the part of planters to chattel slavery. This is the conventionally accepted historical wisdom that has emerged through vigorous scholarly conversation on the origins of slavery in Virginia.

So powerful is this viewpoint that many historians would contend that there is little left to say on the origins of slavery in Virginia—scholars seem to agree on the broad outlines and currently are contesting only the details of the narrative. Forthcoming work by John C. Coombs, though, suggests that the gradualist explanations for the emergence of slavery in Virginia have been based on limited evidence. Employing a systematic study of probate and land records culled from the deeds, orders, and wills held in Virginia's county court records, Coombs proposes that historians view the "transformation of the colony's labor force as a complex process, with multiple phases and significant sub-regional diversity, in which the timing and extent of investments in slave labor varied widely according to wealth, location, and economic need." Coombs's interpretation of the data suggests that a significant number of Virginia gentry owned enslaved blacks by 1650 and that by 1670 Virginia's planter elite had thoroughly accepted slavery—the oft-recounted ructions of the late seventeenth century had nothing to do with it. Coombs argues that politically powerful English planters approached the grim work of making slavery with malice aforethought and much earlier than historians have previously recognized. The early flexibility experienced by Berlin's Atlantic creoles—such as Emanuel Driggus—was probably possible only on the Eastern Shore. Historians, Coombs writes, have "aggressively extrapolated" misguided conclusions from the unusual experiences of Afro-Virginians like Driggus.[9] Coombs's conclusions will not only remake the origins debate but also give it surprising new life.

The new findings may also fuel the obsession early Americanists seem to have with using Chesapeake evidence to pose and answer questions about slavery in the colonial South (I include myself in the number of Virginia enthusiasts). Virginia has remained the standard laboratory for works on the institutionalization of slavery in the early South, in part because Virginia has the longest written history (in English) of any southern colony and because it has a surfeit of documentary

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[9] John C. Coombs, "Beyond the 'Origins Debate': Rethinking the Rise of Virginia Slavery," in Douglas Bradburn and John C. Coombs, eds., *Early Modern Virginia: New Essays on the Old Dominion* (Charlottesville, forthcoming). See also Coombs, *The Rise of Virginia Slavery, 1630–1730* (Charlottesville, forthcoming). Jennifer L. Morgan has also used wills and probate inventories to investigate the intersection of gender and race, indicating that probate records may have more to tell us than we have previously supposed. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia, 2004).

evidence that can be mined to answer fundamental questions about the origins and nature of slavery (as Coombs's work aptly demonstrates). But Virginia's centrality in the origins debate also deflects attention from other areas of the colonial South and other experiences of slavery, most especially those of enslaved Indians.

Enslavement of Tidewater Algonquians, the remnants of Powhatan's people, was not lawful in Virginia. The Virginia General Assembly repeatedly attested that it was illegal to enslave the colony's native population, and it also insisted that its laws on Indian indenture, which limited the time of servitude allowable for Tidewater Indians, be strictly followed.[10] Though the legislature's continued protestations indicate that such laws were probably frequently and flagrantly violated, Virginia's status as the place to study early slavery and the paucity of sources on enslaved Indians there have meant that Indian slavery has played little or no role in the origins debate. Though all aspects of black chattel slavery are currently objects of intense scholarly scrutiny in southern history, the participation of native people in slavery and the slave trade, both as beneficiaries and as victims, has only recently attracted the attention it deserves. In order to fully comprehend the extent of Indian enslavement, historians involved in the origins debate will have to broaden its scope to explicitly include Indians and will need to move the scholarly laboratories south of the Chesapeake.

Berlin's and Morgan's synthetic works of 1998 address slavery almost exclusively as a black phenomenon, and generally when scholars think about slavery, they think about enslaved blacks. Yet recent work suggests that south of Virginia, Indian enslavement rather than black enslavement was the rule. Alan Gallay's *The Indian Slave Trade: The Rise of the English Empire in the American South, 1670–1717* (2002) brings Indian enslavement in Carolina into sharp focus. Gallay argues that Indian slavery was essential to the geopolitics of the South and that the institution was critical to the establishment of Great Britain as the premier colonial power there. The slave trade was also the determining factor in Anglo-Indian relationships, and it secured British economic power in the region. The Indian slave trade, Gallay reports, caught up as many as 51,000 Indians during the years of its operation, which included the two generations spanning 1670 and the end of the Yamasee War in 1717. Prior to 1715, Carolina exported more enslaved

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[10] "Act CXXXVIII: Concerning Indians" (March 1661), in William Waller Hening, [comp.], *The Statutes at Large: Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia, from the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619 . . .* , vol. II (New York, 1823), 138–43, esp. 143.

people than it imported.[11] (Some of these enslaved Indians were exported to Virginia, where, Coombs argues, they helped make up labor shortfalls during the 1670s; Indian enslavement was legal for nonlocal Indians.[12]) The demographic situation was similar in Louisiana, which relied on small numbers of Indian slaves and no African slaves early in the eighteenth century.[13] Indian enslavement was foundational for early South Carolina (and for Louisiana) in a way that it was not for Virginia, suggesting the necessity of reexamining the origins debate in light of the late-seventeenth-century Carolina experience. Since understanding slavery is intrinsic to understanding the American experience, historians must recognize that many different peoples were ensnared in the slave trade and that in the Southeast, slavery's beginnings were not an exclusively black phenomenon.

Thinking about the Indian slave trade also brings two other, related problems into sharp relief. First, the study of the origins of slavery is undoubtedly enhanced and transformed by understanding the role that the Spanish and the French played in the colonial Southeast. Indeed, Gallay argues that the presence of the Spanish and the French consistently enhanced the power of southeastern Indians vis-à-vis the English. In thinking about slavery, southern historians have a regrettable tendency to concentrate on Anglophone sources, yet paying stricter attention to the interaction of the three imperial powers in the Gulf of Mexico might illuminate the origins debate in interesting and revealing ways. How and when did slavery begin in the Southeast? How did the experience of enslavement and the slave trade under Spanish and French authority differ from that under English control? If scholars applied Coombs's method of close examination of elites to Carolina, what would we learn about the practice and timing of enslavement? Moreover, how did enslaved people, Indian and black alike, negotiate access to freedom? It may be that although Ira Berlin's synthetic category of the Atlantic creole has been consistently and perhaps convincingly called into question for Virginia, it may have more currency when applied to the Southeast. Spanish Florida boasted large communities of free, Christianized blacks; perhaps the Afro-Virginian Atlantic creole Emanuel Driggus had more in common with the residents of Gracia

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[11] Alan Gallay, *The Indian Slave Trade: The Rise of the English Empire in the American South, 1670–1717* (New Haven, 2002), esp. 299. For an older view of the Indian slave trade and the eventual adoption of African slavery by Indians, see Theda Perdue, *Slavery and the Evolution of Cherokee Society, 1540–1866* (Knoxville, 1979).

[12] Coombs, "Beyond the 'Origins Debate.'"

[13] Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 78. See also Daniel H. Usner Jr., *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley before 1783* (Chapel Hill, 1992).

Real de Santa Teresa de Mose than he did with blacks on the Virginia mainland.[14]

The second problem relates to the nature of slavery in the Indian Southeast. Europeans were able to take advantage of preexisting forms of involuntary servitude employed by Indians there. These forms of slavery did not have the capitalist content of European slavery, and Indians were not dependent on enslaved rivals for labor; however, indigenous slavery served as a sign of status for captors and signaled the importance of kinship ties. Europeans stepped into this atmosphere and were able to quickly excite interest in the notion of human bodies as valuable commodities and gain Indian participation in the trade.[15] This was true of not only the Southeast but also west of Louisiana into Texas and the vast, poorly controlled Spanish province of New Mexico. James F. Brooks, in *Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands* (2002), argues for the existence of an indigenous slavery that was not unlike that of the Southeast: it was not economically vital, but it was widely employed to enhance the status of warriors and captors. Captives were often absorbed into their new societies, both indigenous and Spanish New Mexican, through the mechanisms of kinship, becoming "agents of conflict, conciliation, and cultural redefinition." Though the Southwest's slave system was, unlike the Southeast's, largely isolated from the Atlantic slave economy, Brooks writes that "[t]o explore this region's slave economy is to complicate and enrich our understanding of North American slavery."[16]

How might the nature of the origins debate change if it took into account slavery across the South, broadly defined? When viewed from the vantage point of New Mexico, Virginia slavery begins to look increasingly exceptional. Juliana Barr has suggested that examining slavery with a continental perspective makes the black chattel slavery of the eighteenth-century Southeast appear anomalous.[17] Indeed, if we accept Brooks's challenge to complicate our understanding of North American slavery, we are left with the sense that the two regions for which we know the most about slavery, Virginia and Carolina, were quite different from the rest of the continent. Their slavery model became the dominant one in the antebellum United States South, but

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[14] Jane Landers, "Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose: A Free Black Town in Spanish Colonial Florida," *American Historical Review*, 95 (February 1990), 9–30.

[15] Gallay, *Indian Slave Trade*, 29.

[16] James F. Brooks, *Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands* (Chapel Hill, 2002), 31 (first quotation), 33 (second quotation).

[17] Juliana Barr, "How Do You Get from Jamestown to Santa Fe? A Colonial Sun Belt," *Journal of Southern History*, 73 (August 2007), 553–66.

in the two centuries before the American Revolution, their slave sys-
tems were precariously situated on a continent where other forms of
slavery and other assumptions about unfree labor predominated. Part
of this exceptionalism might lie in Virginia's and Carolina's proximity
to the Caribbean and their close ties to the Atlantic economy, although
John Coombs suggests that Virginia's seventeenth-century Caribbean
connections have been overemphasized.[18] Moreover, French Louisiana
certainly was an active participant in the Atlantic economy without
developing a slave system that resembled that of Virginia or Carolina
(indeed, slavery as we know it did not flourish there until after the
Louisiana Purchase). When one takes a continental perspective, Indian
slavery seems to have been the norm in New France as well: 55 percent
of eighteenth-century New France's 1,200 or so enslaved people were
Indians (many of them Pawnees captured and sold to the French after
conflicts on the Great Plains).[19] Slavery was not just an Atlantic matter
but also a continental phenomenon.

Also requiring a broad perspective is the question of how European
planters justified slavery ideologically. Where did the idea of "race"
come from? Winthrop Jordan has argued that even prior to their New
World experiences, the English broadly conceived of themselves as
superior to Africans. The English, Jordan wrote, saw blackness as a
color deeply associated with evil, which predisposed them to form racial
ideologies. Yet others have taken the opposite position, contending that
racial ideologies did not come into being until after the slave system
was firmly entrenched. Slavery and the slave trade were the products
of economic necessity, and Europeans later turned to race as an explan-
atory scheme for a system they had already designed. In 1996 Ivan
Hannaford surveyed the intellectual history of Western Europe, con-
cluding that a firm idea of race, meaning "the biological transmission
of innate qualities," was not in place among Europeans until the late
eighteenth or the early nineteenth century. In other words, race was a
modern idea based on a scientific understanding of heredity that had lit-
tle place in the story of European colonization of the New World.[20] The

[18] Coombs, "Beyond the 'Origins Debate.'"

[19] Peter Moogk, *La Nouvelle France: The Making of French Canada—A Cultural History* (East
Lansing, Mich., 2000), 109–10. On Indian slavery in New France, see also Brett Rushforth, "'A
Little Flesh We Offer You': The Origins of Indian Slavery in New France," *William and Mary
Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 60 (October 2003), 777–808.

[20] Ivan Hannaford, *Race: The History of an Idea in the West* (Baltimore, 1996), 3 (quota-
tion), 232; Jordan, *White over Black*, 3–40. Scholars, especially those who specialize in literature,
disagree on how grim the assessment of English racism prior to colonization ought to be. See, for
example, Emily C. Bartels, "*Othello* and Africa: Postcolonialism Reconsidered," *William and Mary
Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 54 (January 1997), 45–64. Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan

two positions thus represent the chicken-and-egg nature of the scholarly debate: which came first, slavery or race? Did planters first institutionalize slavery and then create race to justify the inhuman qualities of bondage, or did preexisting ideas of race lead to slavery?

The circularity of arguments regarding race and slavery constitutes a different kind of origins debate: from whence came that singularly damaging idea of race? As with the origins of slavery, Virginia has been historians' favorite place to examine the emergence of race. For Virginia, Alden T. Vaughan has suggested a point of agreement among historians who study the issue: that English planters exhibited some signs of racist beliefs about blacks in the seventeenth century but that full-fledged racial ideologies did not emerge until later.[21] Virginia's wealth of written resources offers again in this instance both the curse of uncertainty and the hope of salvation. Virginia's black population remained small prior to the 1660s and 1670s, and much of the evidence advanced to show planters' racial ideologies (or lack thereof) is suggestive rather than conclusive. Yet the basic question remains: when did Virginia's English planters express their reservations about blacks in terms historians can positively identify as racial rather than as ethnocentric? The question matters because it can help scholars understand the nature of early modern ideas about difference and how those ideas did (or perhaps did not) contribute to the Atlantic system of slavery. As with the problem of the origins of slavery, the scholarly dialogue is more helpful when viewed from beyond the confines of Virginia, in an Atlantic context populated by Europeans, Indians, and Africans.

If Europeans did not have a coherent racial ideology from which they constructed their slave systems, then what did Europeans think about bodily difference? James H. Sweet's exploration of the Iberian experience of race following the Reconquista concludes that "[b]iological assumptions that were familiar to a nineteenth-century Cuban slaveowner would have been recognizable to his fifteenth-century Spanish

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reach a different conclusion on this point, however, finding widespread evidence of suspicion and contempt for Africans. See Vaughan and Vaughan, "Before *Othello*: Elizabethan Representations of Sub-Saharan Africans," *ibid.*, 19–44. For opposing positions, see Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492–1800* (London, 1997), 329. The position that race followed slavery is more common in Marxist historiography, which requires an economic cause for the adoption of slavery. On that point, see also Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944; new ed., Chapel Hill, 1994); and Barbara Jeanne Fields, "Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States of America," *New Left Review*, no. 181 (May–June 1990), 95–118. For a useful, though older, review of the literature, see Alden T. Vaughan, "The Origins Debate: Slavery and Racism in Seventeenth-Century Virginia," in Vaughan, *Roots of American Racism: Essays on the Colonial Experience* (New York, 1995), 136–74.

[21] Vaughan, "Origins Debate," 156.

counterpart." The claim is startling, because it supposes a European understanding of race before there was a modern vocabulary to describe the phenomenon. Sweet argues that Iberian racial idiom only strengthened through slavery.[22] Though Sweet confines his analysis to views of Africans in the Iberian Atlantic, the idea of "racism before race" is a powerful indicator of European ideas of bodily difference. Joyce E. Chaplin also finds the presence of racial idiom in the English encounter with Indians in North America. Observing rampant Indian death from European disease, the English began to describe their bodily superiority to Indians as a way of justifying their occupation of the land— English bodies were better suited to North America than Indian bodies. Chaplin notes that these descriptions "gestured toward racial identifications of the body" without being a fully developed ideology.[23] Such inchoate racial thinking, while lacking the pseudoscientific sophistication of racial ideologies in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, changed to fit the circumstances Europeans encountered in the New World. Sweet and Chaplin suggest that rather than approaching the problem of race as a chicken-and-egg conundrum, scholars should examine the ways in which interactions among Europeans, Indians, and Africans shaped and were shaped by nascent ideas of race.

How, then, did "racism before race" assist in the construction of a notion of hereditary suitability for dispossession and/or lifelong enslavement? If race grew from protobiological assumptions about the nature of heredity and lineage that were employed to define and describe Africans' and Indians' permanent inferiority to Europeans, then understanding what those assumptions were and how they acted upon emergent racial ideologies and the concomitant construction of slavery will serve scholars well. Some historians have turned to examining discourses of class, gender, and power to explain the emergence of and change in ideas of race. There is consensus on the role that European cultural definitions of gender and, among the English especially, reservations about interracial sexual activity and marriage played in constructing and maintaining racial boundaries over the long seventeenth century. Gendered systems of slavery and race seem to have been mutually reinforcing: as slavery became legally codified, legislators enacted race through bans on interracial marriage, thus stigmatizing interracial sex outside marriage, and declared the children of enslaved women to

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[22] James H. Sweet, "The Iberian Roots of American Racist Thought," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 54 (January 1997), 143–66 (quotation on 166).

[23] Joyce E. Chaplin, *Subject Matter: Technology, the Body, and Science on the Anglo-American Frontier, 1500–1676* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), 160.

also be slaves. In other words, gender and race constructed one another in an intricate dance that took place over several generations.[24] But even as historians have examined gender ideologies and their effects on race, they have overlooked or subordinated to gender and class other cultural factors that also contributed to making racial ideologies.

This is especially true of religion. Early modern Europeans viewed their world through the lens of their religious beliefs even more than their notions of gender; their worldviews were based to a certain extent on religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants and on suspicions of non-Christians. The encounter with Indians and Africans constituted a clash of different religious outlooks: the certainty of European Catholics and Protestants collided with the relativism and syncretism of Indians and Africans.[25] What role did religion play in constructing racial ideologies in the Americas? European religious beliefs affected how Europeans categorized human difference and how they ascribed difference to inherited characteristics. The large and growing literature on the curse of Cham (or Ham) offers evidence of how Europeans explained both different skin colors and the cultural differences among Europeans, Indians, and Africans. The biblical Noah's sons, Shem, Cham, and Japhet, were the progenitors of modern humans, according to Genesis. Conventional wisdom held that Japhet was the ancestor of Europeans, Shem (Sem) was the ancestor of Semitic peoples, and Cham, who, according to some interpretations of Genesis, had been cursed with blackness and perpetual servitude by his father, was the ancestor of Africans. (There was a heated dispute as to the origins of Indians: were they Japhetan or Semitic?) Thus, in debates over the construction of Noachic genealogies, Europeans began to define human difference as sanctioned by scripture, even as the Bible seemed to also point to the common ancestry and therefore the common humanity of Europeans, Indians, and Africans.[26] Sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and even eighteenth-century ideas of race were not monolithic; rather, race was an oft-disputed construct in the Atlantic world, and Christian belief and

[24] Morgan, *Laboring Women*; Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs*; Kirsten Fischer, *Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina* (Ithaca, 2002); Jennifer M. Spear, "Race Matters in the Colonial South," *Journal of Southern History*, 73 (August 2007), 579–88.

[25] For a particularly poignant look at the clash of European religious exclusivism and Indian religious relativism, see Emma Anderson, *The Betrayal of Faith: The Tragic Journey of a Colonial Native Convert* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007).

[26] See, as examples from a voluminous literature, Benjamin Braude, "The Sons of Noah and the Construction of Ethnic and Geographical Identities in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 54 (January 1997), 103–42; and David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton, 2003).

biblical exegesis simultaneously resisted and reinforced the emergence of race.

As Colin Kidd has put it, not only was race a "Scripture problem," but also it is unsurprising that "the dominant feature of western cultural life—Christianity—should have exerted an enormous influence on its [race's] articulation." Christianity was a factor in both the construction and the mitigation of race—Christianity's effects were varied and often contradictory, yet few European commentators could convincingly address the obvious problems of human difference in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries without referencing the Bible, entrenched European belief systems, or Noachic genealogies. Though slavery remained, to a large extent, theologically unproblematic until the emergence of the abolitionist movement at the end of the eighteenth century, Christian believers, according to Kidd, seem to have found race more difficult to justify.[27]

This piece of the problem of race demands further scholarly inquiry. Using religion as a category of analysis in the construction of race and slavery could have interesting implications for both aspects of the origins debate. Far from making an "unthinking decision" to adopt the concept of race, Europeans clearly spent a great deal of time thinking about race and human variety, and their competing explanations for cultural and physical differences among people manifested themselves in the New World. And indeed, whatever role religion played in making race, it is also clear that by the early nineteenth century, religion was beginning to play a dual role in both justifying slavery and condemning it.[28] The patterns of proslavery Christianity and abolitionist Christianity that are so familiar to scholars of the antebellum South have their origins in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—another important reason for historians to more closely engage the complicated relationship between Christian belief and race.

The wealth of scholarship that has been published in the last decade on the origins of slavery and race should provide impetus for new synthetic scholarship. In reworking both prongs of the origins debate, this new synthesis must include continental as well as Atlantic perspectives, while still remaining sensitive to immense geographical

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[27] Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600–2000* (Cambridge, Eng., 2006), 19. For a less rosy take on the role of religion in constructing race, see Rebecca Anne Goetz, "From Potential Christians to Hereditary Heathens: Religion and Race in the Early Chesapeake, 1590–1740" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 2006).

[28] On this question see Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill, 2008).

and chronological variations in the emergence of race and slavery. Scholars are now concluding that slavery became entrenched much earlier than we have previously supposed, as the enduring debates about slavery in Virginia indicate. Even inchoate ideas of race—racial idiom— seemingly emerged earlier than we have thought and apparently did not require either institutionalized slavery or the Enlightenment to attain their full articulation. The early commitment to slavery and the early emergence of race suggest the mutuality of both categories: they created, sustained, and justified one another in incredibly complex ways that scholars are only just beginning to understand. By avoiding the polarities of the origins debate, we may come to a deeper understanding of how emergent European racial ideology interacted with the institution of slavery. The tragedy, though, as we know from modern history, is that racial ideology has long outlasted legalized slavery in the Americas.